Questions and Answers on the BLM's
Sage-Grouse Implementation Instruction Memorandums

BACKGROUND: The Bureau of Land Management is taking another step forward on an unprecedented collaborative effort to conserve Greater Sage-Grouse and its habitat by issuing seven policies, known as Instruction Memorandums (IMs), detailing how aspects of the Greater Sage-grouse plans will be implemented. The IMs cover oil and gas leasing and development, grazing, and the collection and use of land management data.

The seven IMs cover:

- Oil and gas leasing and development
- Grazing permit review priorities
- Grazing management thresholds and responses
- Adaptive management triggers
- Disturbance tracking
- Effectiveness monitoring
- Habitat assessment

Q. What is different about the development of the Instruction Memoranda that BLM is releasing today?

A. Traditionally, the BLM develops Instruction Memorandums, which serve as policy guidance for the agency, internally. In this case, we sought the input and ideas from our partners to inform these policies that will guide the implementation of our Greater Sage-Grouse plans across the West.

Q. Why did you elect to involve partners in helping you create these policies?

A. The Greater Sage-Grouse planning process was highly collaborative from its beginnings, and BLM is committed to continuing this engagement during plan implementation. We shared our draft approach for implementation guidance with our partners to garner their important input on making our policy approaches practical, clear and consistent, and flexible enough to be responsive to local situations and concerns. We incorporated that feedback into the guidance we are issuing today.

Q. How did you respond to the comments by the partners?

A. Each of the policies issued today was substantially influenced by partner feedback. The overarching issue the BLM heard from our partners was a concern that the policies establish consistency between field offices but with enough flexibility to address local issues. Each policy strives to provide guidance on process and considerations for analysis while leaving the necessary discretion to local managers to address local needs and project-specific facts.

OIL AND GAS LEASING AND DEVELOPMENT

BACKGROUND: This IM provides guidance on how the BLM will prioritize oil and gas leasing and development in relation to habitat management areas, consistent with its sage-grouse conservation strategy and GRSG Resource Management Plans (RMPs).

This policy clarifies how oil and gas activities will be sequentially prioritized for leasing and development on BLM-managed public lands in order to avoid and minimize impacts on Greater Sage-Grouse habitat.

When reviewing lands nominated by industry for potential oil and gas leasing, the BLM will focus first on areas outside of priority and general habitat. Areas in general habitat will be considered second. Priority habitat, which has the highest value for maintaining sustainable GRSG populations, will be considered last. This same priority will also apply to applications for permits to drill and other development like associated pipelines, powerlines, and roads.

For leases sold but not issued, the BLM will apply the prioritization sequence to process the lease issuance and assure the leases are in conformance with the GRSG RMPs.

This IM provides guidance on the use of tools to aid in the Greater Sage-Grouse conservation effort, such as mitigation, lease suspensions, lease reinstatements, and lease extension requests.

Early coordination and careful review of proposed oil and gas projects with all stakeholders, Federal, state, tribal and local government agencies, operators, landowners, etc., will assist the BLM in implementing the land use plans commitments consistent with Greater Sage-Grouse conservation objectives while reducing potential conflicts with oil and gas development projects, minimizing project delays, and reducing costs to developers.

Q. The BLM deferred a number of acres from leasing pending the Record of Decision of the Greater Sage-Grouse plans. Of those acres, how many will the BLM offer for lease and how many will the BLM decide not to lease at this time?

A. The IM makes no decision about the number of acres that will be leased or not leased. The authorized BLM officer may issue leases that have been deferred with revised stipulations consistent with the GRSG plans, after a public notice period; the number of acres that are ultimately offered will depend on the results of decisions made by individual state offices.

Q. Why did it take you so long to complete this IM?

A. Developing the IM required thoughtful and extensive internal and external coordination and discussion. We engaged in extensive outreach to help guide us in developing this and other sage-grouse plan implementation guidance. We believe this policy will provide practical guidance to the BLM employees for implementing the sage-grouse land use plans.

Q. Does the IM prohibit oil and gas leasing and development in sage-grouse habitat?

A. Development in sage-grouse habitat is allowed under the GRSG RMPs, but the plans also provided for the prioritization of that development. Under the IM, BLM will consider leasing and development first outside of GRSG habitat, then in general, and lastly, in priority habitat.

Additional restrictions found in the GRSG RMPs, including buffers, no surface occupancy (NSO) stipulations, and Required Design Features (RDF) will also be applied, consistent with valid existing rights, in order to avoid and reduce surface disturbance, negative impacts, and habitat fragmentation from oil and gas development. Throughout most of the range, new leases in Priority Habitat Management Areas (PHMA) issued under the sage-grouse land use plans will be issued as No Surface Occupancy; therefore, they can only be accessed via directional drilling. The BLM will work with lessees, operators and other proponents of proposed oil and gas projects to determine the most appropriate location for development consistent with the conservation objectives and provisions of the sage-grouse plans and will mitigate adverse impacts to sage-grouse habitat by avoiding, minimizing, reducing, rectifying, and compensating for residual impacts. Disturbance and density calculations will be tracked in order to stay below the cap. For more information about disturbance tracking, see p. 9.

Q. Do all Applications for Permits to Drill (APDs) need to be processed strictly in the prioritization sequence?

A. No. The BLM's goal is to work with operators to encourage development outside of sage-grouse habitat ahead of development within sage-grouse habitats by prioritizing the processing of APDs outside of habitat, however, field offices retain the discretion to consider other existing workload considerations and development factors in prioritizing workload provided they are operating consistent with the GRSG land use plan and the guidance in the IM.

Q. How will the restoration goals and objectives apply to oil and gas development?

A. The BLM will continue to work with all operators to plug idle wells, timely restore well sites with appropriate habitat seed mixes, reclaim roads, and reduce fragmentation. The goal is to restore development sites to improve habitat for the sage-grouse.

Q. Will oil and gas valid existing rights be honored? Will operators be able to develop leases they already have?

A. Yes, oil and gas valid existing rights will be honored on leases already issued prior to the sage-grouse land use plans, subject to stipulations that were attached to the lease and in consideration of the GRSG RMPs' goals, objectives, allowable uses, and management direction.

Q. How is the BLM going to incentivize oil and gas leasing development outside of Priority Habitat Management Areas (PHMA)?

A. The IM encourages BLM state offices to work with partners to develop strategies to incentivize development outside of PHMA. For example, relinquishment of leases is a new

mitigation concept that the BLM is considering using as a mechanism to protect critical sage-grouse habitat in areas such as a lek or important seasonal habitat. Under this concept, the record title owner(s) of existing federal oil and gas leases located in SFAs, PHMAs, or other sensitive habitat areas would voluntarily terminate those leases as an offset to the potential impacts to GRSG and its habitat from other activities occurring on the public lands. This mitigation could be used to satisfy the mitigation requirement imposed by the GRSG RMPs on oil and gas development and other activities taking place within GRSG habitat areas.

GRAZING PRIORITIZATION

BACKGROUND: Almost all sagebrush areas on public land are managed to include livestock grazing. To ensure that grazing continues in a manner consistent with the purpose of conserving Greater Sage-Grouse (GRSG) and its habitat, the BLM's recently completed land use plans (GRSG Plans) prioritize work to renew permits and monitor allotments in those areas that are most important to GRSG populations.

This IM describes how to prioritize the review and processing of grazing permits and leases in GRSG habitat. It also provides guidance on prioritizing monitoring of grazing allotments in GRSG habitat to ensure they are meeting Land Health Standards (LHS) and GRSG habitat objectives.

Generally, the highest priority areas of GRSG habitat are allotments in Sagebrush Focal Areas (SFA). These are followed by Priority Habitat Management Areas (PHMA) outside of SFAs, Important Habitat Management Areas (IHMAs in Idaho only), General Habitat Management Areas (GHMA), and Other Habitat Management Areas (in Nevada and Northeast California only).

Allotments with listed threatened and endangered species (T&E) habitat and BLM sensitive species habitat are also high priority, even if they do not include GRSG habitat.

Monitoring grazing use and compliance with permits and management plans should be prioritized in areas where livestock use has the potential to affect seasonal GRSG habitats.

A documented, well-organized procedure for prioritizing the review and processing of grazing permits in GRSG habitat is essential to implement the GRSG Plans.

The purpose for setting priorities is <u>to make the most efficient and effective use of resources for grazing permit review and renewal to maintain and improve the quality of GRSG habitat</u> by focusing on management activities in areas of highest habitat value for GRSG and, where significant progress toward achieving the GRSG Plan habitat objectives and LHS can be achieved.

The decision to prioritize in this way does not indicate that grazing is more of a threat or is an incompatible use in any given area, but rather reflects a decision to prioritize limited resources to ensure grazing is properly managed in those areas most important to the species.

If the BLM finds that relevant habitat objectives are not being met due to improper grazing, the BLM will work with the permittees and other stakeholders to ensure progress towards meeting them.

Q. What are the priorities for the reviewing and processing of grazing permits/leases in sage-grouse habitat?

A. Generally, the highest priorities for work needed to review and process grazing permits will be in allotments that are in Sagebrush Focal Areas (SFAs), or overlap extensively with SFAs, followed by Priority Habitat Management Areas (PHMAs) outside of SFAs, and then, Idaho-only Important Habitat Management Areas (IHMAs). Higher priority is assigned to allotments where land health status has not been evaluated. Additional criteria that can inform prioritization are included in the IM and include areas where modifications to grazing management will facilitate implementation of vegetation treatments to make progress towards meeting habitat objectives. Allotments with threatened and endangered species may be prioritized even if they are outside GRSG habitat.

Q. Can priorities change?

A. Yes. Priorities for a particular allotment may change if on-the-ground conditions change or if significant new activities are authorized.

Q. My allotment is outside Greater Sage-Grouse habitat. Does that mean that processing my renewal application will be delayed until after all the priority areas are processed within the bird's habitat?

A. The emphasis on gathering data, completing land health assessments and processing permits in GRSG habitat will affect the BLM's ability to complete all of the requirements prior to the expiration of grazing permits in lower priority areas. However, when a field office (FO) is unable to complete the requirements of NEPA and other applicable laws prior to the expiration of a grazing permit, the BLM will issue a new permit with the same terms and conditions as the expired permit in accordance with existing grazing regulations, until the work to process the permit is completed.

Q. What if my allotment is found to be not meeting land health standards and habitat objectives?

A. If a certain allotment is not meeting land health standards and sage-grouse habitat objectives, and livestock grazing is a causal factor, the BLM will work with the permittee to ensure progress toward meeting the habitat objectives, consistent with the ecological site potential.

Q. How will permittees and other stakeholders be involved in the prioritization and processing of grazing permits?

A. BLM will involve permittees and other stakeholders early and throughout the process. Even though the highest priority areas are allotments in SFAs followed by PHMAs outside SFAs, the BLM will also use other criteria for prioritization such as the potential for partnerships with adjacent land owners/permittees and other stakeholders. The BLM will also consult and coordinate with grazing permit holders, interested public, state agencies, tribes and other federal agencies when gathering data to compare current conditions to land health standards and habitat objectives; developing alternatives for NEPA analysis, particularly when considering

adjustments in authorized use; and developing a monitoring plan, particularly if other parties will be collecting data to determine the effectiveness of any changes in management.

GRAZING THRESHOLDS

BACKGROUND: This Instruction Memorandum (IM) provides guidance for incorporating thresholds and responses into the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis and, as appropriate, into terms and conditions of grazing permits within designated GRSG habitat.

When a field office (FO) fully processes a grazing permit/lease in Sagebrush Focal Area (SFA) or Priority Habitat Management Area (PHMA) and prepares an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), the NEPA analysis will include at least one alternative that analyzes the incorporation of thresholds and defined responses into the grazing permit or lease.

Measurable thresholds will be developed at the site-specific or allotment level based on the GRSG habitat objectives, land health standards, ecological site potential and condition. Examples of measureable grazing use thresholds include percent utilization or browse utilization limits.

This IM provides the BLM with guidance to promote the flexibility of BLM and permittees to quickly respond if a grazing use threshold is exceeded that would not allow an allotment to make progress towards meeting land health standards. Without this flexibility, when BLM determines that changes to the terms and conditions of a grazing permit are needed to meet land health standards, the process can take several years to complete.

Grazing use thresholds and the range of responses will likely vary and will be dependent upon the allotment's ecological condition and site potential.

While grazing use thresholds and responses must be analyzed as part of the NEPA process for all permit renewals and modifications involving SFAs or PHMAs, BLM is not required to select the alternative that incorporates these thresholds and responses. BLM will focus on incorporating thresholds/responses into grazing permits where current livestock grazing is a causal factor for not meeting land health standards or there is a change in management. Thresholds and responses may not need to be included in a grazing permit or lease within an allotment in SFA or PHMA if it meets or makes significant progress towards meeting all land health standards relative to GRSG habitat or changes to grazing management would not improve habitat condition.

FOs may use a categorical exclusion (CX) to satisfy NEPA requirements if an allotment is meeting GRSG habitat objectives and land health standards and a CX is otherwise allowable.

BLM will continue to coordinate with permittees, state agencies, tribes, Federal agencies, interested public, and others during the permit renewal process including developing thresholds and responses.

Q. Why did it take the BLM so long to complete this IM? It was due 90 days after the RODs were signed.

A. Developing the IM required extensive internal coordination and consultation and collaboration with states and stakeholders.

Q. Why is it important to analyze thresholds and responses in at least one alternative, and why should BLM consider incorporating them into the terms and conditions of grazing permits?

A. Analyzing thresholds and responses in at least one alternative and incorporating them into the terms and conditions of grazing permits/leases, if an alternative with thresholds and responses is selected, allows the BLM and permittees to respond more quickly when grazing practices are impeding achievement or progress toward achieving land health standards.

Q. How will the permit renewal process change in GRSG habitat?

A. The overall process has not changed. However, the BLM will increase use of quantitative data for evaluating land health standards in sage-grouse habitat. The BLM will use this data to assess sage-grouse habitat suitability relative to the habitat objectives, as adapted for ecological site potential, and use that information and other available information to inform conclusions about whether or not the applicable land health standards are being achieved. The BLM will also continue to use program specific or long-term monitoring data to support grazing decisions. The BLM will continue to issue grazing decisions using its existing permitting process, with which stakeholders are familiar.

Q. Did the plans require across the board adjustments to grazing?

A. No. The plans do not require across the board adjustments to grazing or any individual adjustment. The plans articulate habitat objectives (that include consideration of ecological site potential) for all uses to inform land heath standards and describe processes and tools for prioritizing workload and working with grazing permittees to meet or make progress toward meeting these objectives. The BLM will continue to follow existing processes including conducting land health evaluations, complying with NEPA and issuing proposed/final grazing decisions.

Q. Will the BLM require a 7-inch stubble height everywhere in sage-grouse habitat?

A. No. The habitat indicators and desired conditions in the Habitat Objectives table of the land use plans will guide the development of thresholds for the seasonal habitats found in the allotment and will be adjusted as necessary to account for ecological site potential in the area being assessed. The habitat objectives in the table summarize the characteristics that research has found represent the seasonal habitat needs for sage-grouse and provide broad vegetative conditions that BLM strives to obtain. No single habitat indicator defines whether the habitat objectives are or are not met. Instead, the preponderance of evidence from all indicators within that specific seasonal habitat must be considered when assessing whether an allotment is meeting sage-grouse habitat objectives.

Q. How will permittees and other stakeholders be involved in the development of thresholds and responses?

A. The BLM will continue to involve permittees and other stakeholders early and throughout the process. The BLM will consult and coordinate with grazing permit holders, interested public, state agencies, tribes and other appropriate Federal agencies when 1) gathering data to compare current conditions to land health standards and objectives; 2) developing alternatives for NEPA analysis including thresholds and a suite of options for responding more quickly when exceeding thresholds; and 3) developing and implementing a monitoring plan.

Q. Will BLM require changes to livestock grazing even if the primary cause of not meeting land health standards is something else – such as wild horse and burro grazing? Are ranchers going to be penalized because BLM isn't managing wild horses and burros?

A. BLM may need to make changes to livestock grazing management in order to maintain and improve land health. BLM will continue to work with permittees during the land health evaluation process which includes a causal factor analysis.

Q. Are there criteria for weighing information or a minimum score needed to meet Land Health Standards?

A. There is not a standard on which criteria are given more weight than others or a minimum score to meet Land Health Standards. The BLM will evaluate all the available information and make a determination based on the specific facts in the overall context of the area being assessed. In any given situation, some evaluation factors may have more weight than others. While not all evaluation factors may be evident, the relative strength of those present may indicate a healthy rangeland.

ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT TRIGGERS

BACKGROUND: The Greater Sage-Grouse (GRSG) Approved Resource Management Plans and Amendments (plans) approved in the September 21, 2015, Great Basin and Rocky Mountain GRSG Regional Records of Decision (ROD), contain plan-specific triggers that were developed with state and federal wildlife agency experts which require the agency to take pre-defined management actions in response to changes in habitat or population metrics.

This IM outlines a framework and timeline across the BLM to support a coordinated evaluation and notification process related to the GRSG plans' adaptive management strategy.

BLM state offices are to analyze GRSG population and habitat data on an annual basis upon receiving population data from the appropriate state wildlife agency, typically in the fall after the fire season has ended. In the event of a significant habitat or population loss due to disasters such as wildfire, the loss data should be analyzed as soon as possible after the event.

Triggers requiring multi-year analysis will use the most current data as the endpoint. For example, a five-year trend beginning with 2015 data would cover the years 2011-2015.

Coordination among technical specialists from appropriate state and federal agencies is encouraged, based on the process outlined in the applicable GRSG Plan. The IM describes the process for coordination and notification of appropriate federal, state, county or tribal partners. State offices are responsible for ensuring that the appropriate responses are implemented by the appropriate district or field office.

Q. How will you coordinate implementation activities with the states when the adaptive management triggers are exceeded (tripped) in areas that cross state lines?

A. The sage-grouse plans specify that if a "hard" trigger is tripped in an area that crosses state boundaries, a multi-state Conservation Team would convene to discuss causes and identify potential responses. The BLM is in the process of setting up the conservation teams.

DISTURBANCE TRACKING

BACKGROUND: The Surface Disturbance Analysis and Reclamation Tracking Tool (SDARTT) was developed to fulfill the commitments made in the GRSG Plans in GRSG PHMA, SFA, and IHMA (ID only)to track the degradation threats to determine if percentages are below the disturbance and density caps, which leads to a need to also track reclamation. This policy helps to implement the protocols in the GRSG Land Use Plans' disturbance and density cap appendix, and the GRSG Monitoring Framework appendix.

The USGS has been working with several BLM field offices since 2006 to develop disturbance and reclamation tracking databases which have evolved into this national web-based tool. In addition, many partners in WY have been using the Density and Disturbance Calculation Tool (DDCT) since 2012. Field Offices with existing disturbance tracking and those using the DDCT will continue to use their respective databases, which will be incorporated into the SDARTT database to provide range-wide tracking of habitat degradation and reclamation.

BLM State and Field Offices will use SDARRT to track proposed, permitted, and as-built surface disturbance projects and the subsequent interim and final reclamation of these disturbances as identified in the appendix of this IM.

The BLM's National Operations Center (NOC) will calculate estimates of west-wide disturbance amounts in PHMA, SFA (a subset of PHMA), IHMA, and BSUs on an annual basis. If the NOC estimate indicates a BSU may be close to or has exceeded the cap, BLM State and Field Offices will need to use more specific local data to calculate the BSU disturbance to inform NEPA analysis on any future projects that may impact the BSU cap. The NOC estimate is intended to be an early warning signal as well as to determine the trend of disturbance across the range using west-wide, consistent data.

The IM explains the capabilities of the national geospatial web-based SDARTT, training, authentication and verification permissions, user support options, reporting abilities, template of deficiencies and COAs, and guidance for field offices using an existing disturbance and reclamation tracking tool.

Q. What is SDARTT?

A. The USGS has been working with several BLM field offices since 2006 to develop disturbance and reclamation tracking databases. This effort has evolved into a national web-based tracking tool known as the Surface Disturbance Analysis and Reclamation Tracking Tool (SDARTT). It will allow the BLM to fulfill the commitments made in the Greater Sage-Grouse land use plans to track habitat degradation and determine if it remains below established disturbance and density caps. In the future it will also allow the BLM to track reclamation of sagebrush habitat. SDARTT capabilities are not just limited to use in GRSG areas; any BLM office can use it.

Q. Who will be using SDARTT?

A. Right now BLM staff is using SDARTT, but anyone inside or outside the agency can use SDARTT for planning, tracking, and reporting.

Q. Will disturbance caps potentially prevent my project for proceeding?

A. Projects will be evaluated to ensure the cap is not exceeded. If the cap may be exceeded, options will be explored to reduce the impact and avoid exceeding the cap. However, if the project cannot be modified to remain under the cap, it will be denied. Valid and existing right will be honored.

Q. If my proposed project is approved, what data will I need to provide?

A. In the near future, public land users will need to upload "as-built" disturbance data for their projects through a publicly available website. The BLM will advise user groups when this system is ready to be used and assist users in meeting these requirements. In the interim, BLM state offices are working with the FOs to upload the necessary information into SDARTT for project-level disturbance calculation.

Q. How will successful reclamation/restoration be defined and removed from counting towards the cap?

A. Many of the land use plans or existing authorizations have defined the conditions necessary to meet the reclamation/restoration requirements, which vary from plan to plan, but mostly revolve around providing the habitat objectives in Table 2-2 in the land use plans. In the future, the BLM would like to standardize core attributes for successful reclamation and then establish the criteria based on local conditions. Once final reclamation/restoration has been achieved and the BLM has approved the reclamation/restoration, the disturbance is no longer counted when calculating the percent disturbance and the permittee is released from their responsibility for that location.

EFFECTIVENESS MONITORING

BACKGROUND: Monitoring at scales that are biologically meaningful for GRSG is critical to understanding if actions we are taking to conserve and restore sage-grouse habitat are effective. The BLM has committed to conducting this monitoring in its land use plans. This IM lays out the methods the agency will use in meeting this commitment at the project, land use plan, regional and national scale.

By using the Assessment, Inventory and Monitoring strategy (AIM), the data we gather on resource conditions and trends at local scales can be rolled up using the Habitat Assessment Framework (HAF) for assessment and reporting across units and larger landscapes.

Additional monitoring, beyond that described in AIM, may be needed to ensure that we are meeting the site-specific land health objectives of the individual plans.

This IM also provides information on tracking plan implementation using the reporting database built within the ePlanning system to track future habitat disturbance using project-specific NEPA analysis. The ePlanning application will direct users to enter the information needed by the BLM to monitor implementation.

BLM State Offices must now use ePlanning to track BLM implementation activities. Offices that aren't ePlanning ready must track these items and enter them into ePlanning when it is available. State offices will provide the Washington Office with annual implementation monitoring reports, as well as summary reports every five years. The NOC will collect and analyze this data at the landscape scale.

Q. What is AIM?

A. AIM stands for Assessment, Inventory, and Monitoring. Over the past ten years, the BLM has worked with our federal partners to develop and adopt principles, core indicators, and standard methods that have been incorporated into the BLM Monitoring Strategy. This strategy establishes the principles that became the components of an integrated monitoring plan that addresses many of the monitoring commitments found the sage-grouse plans.

Q. Can I provide private data on resource, conditions and trends for the BLM use in analyzing habitat conditions in Greater Sage-Grouse habitat?

A. Site-specific data is always valuable to the BLM and will be considered, as appropriate, in making individual authorization decisions. That said, we may not always be able to incorporate these data into our larger-scale assessments. To ensure that the data we gather can be used for multiple purposes at the local, regional and national scales, the data must be gathered in a way that is both statistically defensible and meets AIM standards.

Q. How do I take part in BLM's monitoring?

A. BLM has many partners who participate in monitoring. For example, the BLM and the Public Lands Council participate in a monitoring MOU to encourage cooperative monitoring.

Additionally, local BLM offices encourage permittees to participate in allotment monitoring activities. Please contact your local BLM field office for details.

Q. Will monitoring data be available to the public so we can validate it?

A. Yes, the AIM core indicator values will be available on the BLM Landscape Approach Data Portal on the AIM tab and will be available for viewing or downloading. You can access the Landscape Portal at http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/more/Landscape_Approach/dataportal.html

HABITAT ASSESSMENT

BACKGROUND: The policy provides direction on how to assess habitat for the Gunnison and Greater Sage-Grouse (including the Bi-State Distinct population Segment) and when a habitat assessment is required.

BLM offices are required to use the Sage-Grouse Habitat Assessment Framework (HAF) when assessing habitat for a population/subpopulation of sage-grouse and compile a Habitat Assessment Summary Report. BLM offices will use the Habitat Assessment Summary Report to inform the Land Health Assessments and Land Health Standard(s) evaluation relative to wildlife/special status species habitat quality land health standard(s). BLM Offices may look for opportunities to integrate other measurement and modeling approaches into the habitat assessment.

Field offices whose LUP contains a Habitat Objectives Table are required to use those objectives during sage-grouse habitat assessments. Ecological potential of sites within the assessment area will be taken into account when analyzing the sampling locations and interpreting the habitat measures. Field offices whose land use plan does not contain a Habitat Objectives Table should use objectives from an applicable sage-grouse conservation plan; use the habitat suitability characteristics found in the HAF; or follow procedures set forth in the HAF to modify the indicator values to use during sage-grouse habitat assessments.

Field offices may also consider using BLM legacy or integrate other datasets and information to inform the evaluation of habitat indicators or trends in habitat condition while considering their limitations. Responsibilities for collecting and managing sage-grouse habitat data and information are described in the policy. The BLM will develop training opportunities to support implementation of this policy.

The HAF has been refined by decades of research and policy, and provides a high level of consistency, transparency and expertise to sage-grouse habitat assessments.

Many other agencies, including the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA), have committed to the HAF as a blueprint for sage-grouse habitat evaluation. Also, WAFWA is a co-editor of the HAF.

The HAF uses 4 scales to describe sage-grouse habitat:

- *First and second are the broad and mid scales that refer to the overall area occupied by sage-grouse;*
- *Third is the fine scale that refers to the seasonal habitats (e.g., lek, nesting, brood-rearing and winter) within the broader area; and*
- *Fourth is the site scale that refers to the daily use areas within the (fine-scale) seasonal habitats.*

The HAF process uses primarily vegetation data for a given area to rate the suitability of an area for sage-grouse at each scale. Other data used in the suitability ratings includes the amount of disturbance in those areas that might affect the way that sage-grouse can use the habitat.

Q. What is the Sage-Grouse Habitat Assessment Framework (HAF)?

A. The Sage-Grouse Habitat Assessment Framework is a multi-scale tool for assessing sage-grouse habitat that is based on expertise compiled from decades of research in sage-grouse habitat. The HAF is a peer-reviewed technical reference published by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA), and provides BLM managers and specialists with a consistent, transparent blueprint for assessing sage-grouse habitat.

Q. Why is BLM requiring the use of multi-scale indicators and the habitat suitability process from the Habitat Assessment Framework (HAF)?

A. The HAF process is the best available tool to assess sage-grouse habitat at multiple spatial scales across their range. Sage-grouse select habitat at multiple scales, and are sensitive to landscape change, therefore effective conservation requires actions at scales that match the species' biological needs. Sage-grouse habitat assessment is a key component of measuring the success of the BLM's Greater Sage-Grouse conservation strategy, and can be integrated into the BLM's broader landscape assessment and monitoring approach. In addition, BLM continues to work with its partners to assess and integrate other tools that could be helpful in assessing habitat and condition, including state and transition models.

Q. Why is a habitat assessment an important component of sage-grouse conservation?

A. A multiple scale habitat assessment allows the BLM to identify habitats in need of restoration or management changes. The suitability rating process from the HAF also provides a consistent method to examine whether land health standards are being achieved as part of the land health standards assessment and evaluation process.

Q. When is a habitat assessment required and what can it be used for?

A. BLM offices that manage sage-grouse habitats are required to use the mid-, fine- and site-scale indicators and the habitat suitability rating process provided within the Sage-Grouse Habitat Assessment Framework when assessing sage-grouse habitat for a population/subpopulation/biologically relevant area that encompasses sage-grouse seasonal habitats.

Q. What role will coordination with Federal and state agencies, as well as private groups, play in assessing sage-grouse habitat using the indicators from the Habitat Assessment Framework (HAF)?

A. Sage-grouse use habitat managed by multiple landowners, which makes collaboration and coordination with state agencies, other federal agencies, and private organizations and landholders critical for assessing habitat and implementing successful management. State agency sage-grouse population and habitat use data are a fundamental component of assessing landscape function. In addition, BLM continues to work with its partners to assess and incorporate other tools that could supplement the assessment of sage-grouse habitat and condition, such as state and transition models.

Q. What is the Relationship between the Habitat Assessment Framework (HAF) and the Assessment, Inventory and Monitoring (AIM) Strategy?

A. The HAF is a blueprint for using data to assess habitat suitability for sage-grouse at multiple scales. The data used to assess habitat suitability is ideally collected under the broader AIM Strategy, which is the BLM's process for collecting quantitative information on the status, conditions, trend, amount, location and spatial pattern of renewable resources on BLM lands. Most of the data, but not all, for the site-scale indicators in the HAF are collected as part of the AIM core indicator methodology. HAF is a blueprint for interpreting data to inform the suitability of habitat, AIM is the blueprint for data collection and data management.

Q. Can anyone provide private data on resource conditions and trends for the BLM to use in analyzing habitat conditions in sage-grouse habitat?

A. The BLM will consider using other datasets to inform the evaluation of site-scale habitat indicators or trends in habitat condition. While these datasets may be adequate for site-specific analysis, the utility of these datasets to fully inform the HAF indicators and allow assessment across a larger landscape may be limited, and will be carefully evaluated before use. BLM offices are being directed to transition toward using standardized Assessment, Inventory and Monitoring (AIM) data to conduct sage-grouse habitat assessments and to incorporate AIM data to the extent possible when it is available.

Q. Will the BLM continue to use the data that has been collected for decades on allotments? This data provides important information on the current condition and trend of the allotment considering local ecological potential.

A. As noted above, the BLM will consider using other datasets to inform the evaluation of site-scale habitat indicators or trends in habitat condition. While these datasets may be adequate for site-specific analysis, the utility of these datasets to fully inform the HAF indicators and allow assessment across a larger landscape may be limited, and will be carefully evaluated before use.

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